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White House War for Reagan's Heart and Mind

The President's assistants keep up the appearance of amity. But there's a scramble for power going on, and a big shake-up may be coming.

As he winds up a 19-day vacation on the West Coast, Ronald Reagan is returning to a White House divided by internal dissension.

A power struggle among the President's top advisers has grown so intense that some insiders fear it could diminish the impact of recent gains in the economy and perhaps impede the drive to limit Republican losses in the November 2 elections.

Gone are the days when Reagan's principal aides won praise for the ease with which they worked together. Now, this inner circle seethes with gossip, bickering and policy disputes. "People are devouring each other around here," says one White House adviser. "It's absolutely incredible."

The President's men say the feuding has destroyed the chain of command at the White House. Some blame Reagan for failing to maintain discipline. A few high-ranking officials are threatening to resign.

At the center of the turmoil is a clash between the practical politics of Chief

of Staff James Baker and the ardent conservatism of Counselor to the President Edwin Meese. Although Baker has won the upper hand in policymaking, he and his lieutenants continue to wrangle with the more doctrinaire Reaganites inside and outside the White House. One official calls it "the war between the pragmatists and the keepers of the Holy Grail."

All concerned are trying hard to sweep their differences under the rug until November 2. They hope that after the elections Reagan will halt the warfare by ordering a shake-up of personnel throughout the White House and the cabinet. "There is a growing consensus that something has to be done after the elections," says an aide.

How the President settles this quarrel could determine the future of his bruised relations with his supporters on the right. Many conservative groups will not be satisfied until Reagan replaces Baker with a more conservative chief of staff.

"Nervous as cats." The future of many high-ranking presidential assistants hangs in the balance between now and year's end. Some are ready to resign. Some fear they will be ousted. Others hope to gain more power in a shake-up. One White House official notes: "Everyone around here is as nervous as cats."

E. Pendleton James, who stepped down recently as Reagan's personnel chief, predicts that the administration will experience "one of the largest midterm personnel turnovers" in history at the end of the year—both at the White House and in the cabinet.

What will the outcome be? The following assessment is based on interviews with many White House officials:

Baker. Despite occasional threats to resign, Baker does not want to leave government. Only last year, he turned down a lucrative job offer from a Houston firm. If he fails to gain the status he wants at the White House, he could ask Reagan for a cabinet post. The job of Attorney General or Central Intelligence Agency director, in particular, would appeal to him.

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